
UNIT 19 WOMEN

Structure

- 19.0 Objectives
- 19.1 Introduction
- 19.2 Indicators of Women's Status
 - 19.2.1 Demographic Status
 - 19.2.2 Health Status
 - 19.2.3 Literacy Status
 - 19.2.4 Employment Status
 - 19.2.5 Political Status
- 19.3 Social Structure, Social Processes and Women
 - 19.3.1 The Caste Structure
 - 19.3.2 The Institution of Family
 - 19.3.3 Socialisation within the Family
 - 19.3.4 Class Structure and Women's Work
- 19.4 Violence on Women
 - 19.4.1 Rape, Sexual Harassment and Abuse
 - 19.4.2 Domestic Violence and Dowry Deaths
 - 19.4.3 Prostitution
 - 19.4.4 Pornography and Misrepresentation of Women in the Media
- 19.5 Women's Issues: Challenges and Responses
- 19.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 19.7 KeyWords
- 19.8 Further Readings
- 19.9 Answers to Check Your Progress

19.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall discuss the issues relating to women's identity, dignity and social justice. After going through this unit you should be able to:

- discuss the various indicators of women's status;
- explain the structures and social processes that create and perpetuate women's subordination;
- examine the role of different forms of violence in the society;
- analyse women's issues in a structural and historical context; and
- describe the contemporary challenges and responses to women's issues in India.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

The focus on the status of women in India was drawn by the submission of the report titled 'Towards Equality' by the Committee on the Status of Women in India. This Committee, which was set up by the Government of India at the request of the United Nations, looked into various status indicators to evaluate

the status of women in India. The report had made shocking revelations of the regressive changes that women are faced as against the progressive changes that took place in various sectors of the country. Similar disclosures from other parts of the world made the United Nations declare the year 1975 as the Women's Year and the Decade 1975-85 for women.

The findings of the report and research studies thereafter, demonstrated the contradictions in the Constitutional guarantees of equality for women and the reality. Various issues like rape, dowry deaths, domestic violence, sati, desertion, female foeticide etc., were/are taken up for campaigning and seeking gender justice by women's organisations and human rights groups. The mid 70s and 80s had witnessed the resurgence of the second wave of the women's movement during this century. This new awareness of articulating the experiences of discrimination, subordination and neglect had also found its way into examining the existing body of knowledge. This had seen the heralding of women's studies research. Despite loopholes and inadequacies, there have been legislations, amendments to the existing Acts, policies and programmes for women during the 1970's and 80's.

In this unit we shall focus on some of the problems faced by Indian women. We begin this unit by identifying the indicators of women's status. We then, move on to concentrate on the family as an institution and its role in socialising a daughter to perform a secondary role. We will discuss different forms of violence that threaten the identity and dignity of women, like sexual harassment and rape, domestic violence and dowry deaths, prostitution and pornography and misrepresentation of women in the media. Lastly we shall explain the challenges faced by women's movement in India and various social responses towards the women's issues.

19.2 INDICATORS OF WOMEN'S STATUS

Ironically, in the Indian situation where women goddesses are worshipped, women are denied an independent identity and status. This is strongly ingrained in the social fabric, the culture, the economy and the polity. As the code of Manu states: 'A woman should never be independent. Her father has authority over her in childhood, her husband in youth, and her son in old age.' (Manusmriti, Dharmashastra, IX, 3). Women's identity, freedom, access to resources, opportunities, etc., are determined by the caste and class status of the family. Marital status and their fertility provide an identity to women. Married women achieve status and respect in the family and society after attaining motherhood, especially after giving birth to sons.

Through various cultural processes in the family and society the selfhood of women is denied from childhood. Freedom, individualhood and identity for women is limited and stifled which have various implications. Though there are certain positive changes taking place in terms of women's education, employment, participation in panchayat, etc., there is still a long way to go.

In general, the status of women is evaluated in comparison to the status of men. The major empirical indicators that are utilised for this evaluation are the demographic status, the health status, the literacy status, the employment rates and patterns and the political status.

19.2.1 Demographic Status

The indicators like the sex ratio, the mortality and morbidity patterns and life expectancy enable the evaluation of the demographic status of a population. For purposes of understanding the demographic status of women, we will elaborate on sex ratio and mortality patterns. The sex ratio indicates the proportion of females for 1000 males in the population. In India, since the beginning of this century, the proportion of women in the population has been declining. According to 1981 Census the proportion has slightly increased, however, the provisional figures of the 1991 Census indicate a decline again, with a marginal increase in 2001.

Table 1: Sex-Ratio from 1901 to 1991

Year	Ratio
1901	972
1911	964
1921	955
1931	950
1941	945
1951	946
1961	941
1971	930
1981	934
1991	929
2001	933

Mortality rate or the death rate measures the frequency of deaths. This is an annual rate and is calculated for different age groups as number of deaths for 1000 live births. The age-specific death rate data indicates high rate of female infant mortality (0-4 years) and maternal mortality (5-24 years). The high female infant mortality (36.8) as against male infant mortality (33.6) indicates the discrimination that young girls face in gaining access to adequate food and health care (Sample Registration System (SRS), 1987). The high rates of maternal mortality are because of obstetric risk at delivery and inadequate access to medical care. The low age at marriage and at consummation leads to early age at pregnancy and risk at delivery. The life expectancy rate represents the mean life length an individual is expected to survive given the prevailing mortality conditions. The life expectancy of females is 63.8 years and that of males is 62.8 years (as per 2000 view). It has been observed that the chances of longer life expectancy is higher among women during older years, whereas women in the younger years continue to have relatively higher death rates. (Also see Unit 33, Block 7 of ESO-12).

19.2.2 Health Status

Discrimination against women prevails in providing health care. Studies on hospital admissions and records have shown that men and boys get more medical care compared to women and girls. It is said that women and girls are

taken to “hospitals at much latest stages of ill-health compared to men and boys. Moreover, majorities of Indian women are anaemic. They expend higher levels of energy performing innumerable activities like cooking, cleaning, washing, fetching water, collecting firewood, taking care of the young and old, tending cattle, and working in agriculture field. However, their calorie intake is not commensurate with the energy expenditure. The calorie deficit takes a toll on women’s health in general and reproductive health in particular.

It has also been observed that with environmental degradation women are walking longer miles to collect firewood and water which has increased women’s work load. This has a negative impact on their health. Similarly, since women are the major water carriers, they are susceptible to water-borne infections. Cooking with inefficient fuel like crop wastes, dung cakes etc., and stoves, causes respiratory diseases like chronic bronchitis. Women engaged in agriculture, mines, plantations and in home-based production like rolling bidis, making paper bags, embroidery etc., face several occupational health hazards and are not covered by any health programmes.

19.2.3 Literacy Status

Education is regarded as an important instrument to bring about social change. Apart from its potential to bring about personality development, it also is a means to achieve financial independence and status mobility.

In India, from the post-independence period young women and girls are attaining higher education and entering male dominated fields. However, the overall literacy rates and the relative literacy rates are lower in comparison with male literacy rates. The total literacy rate in India is 65.38%, while for male it is 75.85%, for female it is 54.16% (Census 2001).

There are several factors that cause this situation. Firstly, due to low socio-economic status of the household, children are not sent to school. Even if children are admitted to school, daughters are withdrawn and are given the responsibility of the care of siblings and domestic work. The economic necessity, which compels households to send their children to perform labour, also deprives children of education. A high value is attached to daughter’s marriage and motherhood, therefore, families are unwilling to invest scarce resources in daughter’s education. Boys are more likely to receive such investments in order to improve their chances of employment. (See Unit 32, Block 7 of ESO-12 for further detail.)

19.2.4 Employment Status

Anthropological studies indicate that women were the major producers of food, clothing, crafts and many different tools through most of the human history.

The large majority of Indian women participate in innumerable activities for the survival of their families. However, definitions of ‘work’ and ‘worker’ fall short of capturing the variety of women’s work and its importance to the family. According to 2001 census 25.7% of the female and 39.3% of the males are workers. Of the total female workers 32.5% are cultivators, 39.4% are agricultural labours, 6.4% in the household industry and 21.7% belong to the other category of workers. The majority of these are involved in agriculture,

plantations and mines. Despite the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, women are paid lower wages, occupy lower skilled jobs, have less access to skill training and promotion. Employed women in the urban areas occupy stereotyped jobs like that of teachers, nurses, doctors, clerks and typists. Women are also making inroads into predominantly male oriented occupations like engineering, architecture, aeronautics, manufacturing, police services and management. But cultural barriers, which view women as 'weaker sex', discriminate against their selection, training and promotion. Moreover, women have to work doubly hard to prove their worth. (You may like to read Unit 31, Block 2 of ESO-12 and Unit 11, Block 3 of ESO-O6 for further information.)

19.2.5 Political Status

Unlike many Western countries where women had to put up organised struggles to acquire the right to vote, women in India have the right to vote as citizens of this nation. Though India had a woman Prime Minister, the Late Indira Gandhi, it cannot be said that women are fairly represented in the Parliament and other State and local bodies. They occupy only 8.91% of the seats in the parliament. By and large women have remained passive voters in elections and their polling behaviour is determined by the decisions that the male members and the community take. The question of reservation of 30% seats for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies was widely debated recently. Though this bill has been placed in the parliament on several occasion, it has been withdrawn in one plea or the other. However participation of women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) has been ensured in India with the 73rd constitutional amendment. Taking the advantage of 30% reservation the PRIs more than 30 million women are actively participating in the political decision-making process at the grass root.

Check Your Progress 1

i) Do you see any contradiction in the constitutional guarantee of equality for women and the reality? Answer in nine lines.

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ii) What are the implications of the low status of women? Answer in Seven lines.

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- iii) Tick the appropriate answer
The percentage of women workers is low because
 - a) Women are housewives
 - b) Women are not enumerated as workers
 - c) Women do not work
 - d) Workers are always men.

19.3 SOCIAL STRUCTURE, SOCIAL PROCESSES AND WOMEN

In this section let us try to understand the various structures that create the secondary status of women and perpetuate the discrimination through various social processes.

19.3.1 The Caste Structure

The subordination of women was crucial to the development of caste hierarchy. The higher the caste the greater were the constraints on women. It is observed that the development of gender division, based on the control of female sexuality, was integral to the formation of the social structure.

It might be relevant to ask: What was the need to control women’s sexuality? What was it that women’s power would endanger? How was it linked to material resources? For unravelling these questions it is important to understand the system of caste.

To remind you, there are thousands of sub-castes regionally known as ‘jatis’. However, the pan-Indian social hierarchy is based on the ‘varna’ hierarchy, which divides the Hindu population in four major groups: the *brahmin* (priestly caste) at the top, followed by the *Khatriya* (warrior caste), then the *vaishya* (commoners, usually known as trading castes) and at the bottom the *sudra* (agricultural labourers and artisan). Some who are beyond the caste hierarchy were considered to be untouchables. The caste boundaries are maintained through strict purity – pollution principles, rules of commensality and endogamy, commitment to caste occupation and ascribed life-style. Ritual purity is in the nature of religious status but also coincided with economic wealth and social esteem. That is, the upper castes own more property and the lower castes are property less or have the least property. Over the decades the association of ritual status and economic status has undergone change, The concept of ‘dominant caste’ demonstrates this. (This has been discussed in ESO-14, Block 5, Unit 18, p.15.)

Three of the major signs of purity: vegetarianism, teetotalism and tight constraints on women, indicate that a significant degree of ritual purity comes

through domestic activities. The control on women comes from two major aspects.

- 1) Women's disinheritance from immovable property, removing them from the public sphere and limiting them to the domestic sphere in the form of **seclusion or purdah**.
- 2) Far greater control is exercised by men over women's sexuality through arranged marriage, child marriage, the prohibition of divorce, and strict monogamy for women, leading to sati and a ban on widow remarriage, including infant or child widows.

These strictures were enforced most strictly by the upper castes to maintain ritual purity, biological purity, caste supremacy and economic power. Lower caste groups attempting to achieve upward status mobility with improvement in economic power, also imbibe upper caste norms of constraining women's freedom. M. N. Srinivas had observed this relationship as an index of 'Sanskritisation'.

The ideological and material basis for maintaining the caste system was closely regulated by religious scriptures and the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal family ideology.

19.3.2 The Institution of Family

You must have learnt in your earlier lessons that family is the most important social unit in which members live in a network of mutual ties, roles and obligations, that it is a unit of procreation, it nurtures the young and socialises them (i.e. transmits tradition, culture, religious and social values) to enable them to perform various roles in the society. Family performs the function of continuity of generations and the transmission of private property. The role of the family in procreation is closely intertwined with the pattern of descent and religious prescriptions/priorities. Descents are of two types: patrilineal and matrilineal. In the patrilineal descent system the property of the family is transmitted through the male offspring for example, father to son. In the matrilineal system the property is transmitted through the women, for example, mother to daughter.

Research into various traditions of religious practices, the matriarchal heritage of the 'Shakti' (mother goddesses) cult and beliefs indicate that the patrilineal form of descent, the existence of male gods and constraints on women's freedom were Aryan traditions imposed on liberal indigenous traditions. At present, barring the Nair community of Kerala, the Khasis of the north-east, the Garos of the North-eastern India, and certain tribes in the Lakshdweep, all the other communities practice patrilineal descent system. The worship of mother goddesses is prevalent in all parts of India.

Closely connected to the patrilineality is the practice of patrilocality, i.e., the transfer of residence of women to the village/residence/family of the husband, after marriage. The sons stay with the father. The property laws, therefore, forbade daughters from inheriting immovable property, since such property would pass to their husband's family on marriage. Instead women were given a portion of movable property (like jewellery) to take with them, known as dowry. This provides material reason for anxiety over the birth of daughters.

Moreover, the religious scriptures, especially the Hindu religion place a high preference for sons. According to the code of Manu, a man could achieve merit only by protecting the purity of his wife and through her, of his sons. A son is necessary for lighting the funeral pyre of the father, propitiating the souls of agnatic ascendants through **shradha** and thereby enabling the father and agnatic ascendants to attain **moksha** (to be relieved from rebirth). The role of the women is to beget sons, perpetuate the male descent and facilitate the performance of rituals. This hierarchy of male and female roles create differential evaluation of children with a strong son preference on the one hand and daughter neglect on the other, in terms of access to food, health care, education, freedom, rights and justice. The extraordinary preoccupation of viewing the family as harmonious, egalitarian and consensual unit, which enables the maintenance of social order, has blindfolded sociologists from several observations relating to women. The experiences of women within the family are different from that of men.

19.3.3 Socialisation within the Family

As mentioned earlier socialisation performs the function of transmitting culture, tradition, social values and norms. Apart from parental socialisation in the family, various agencies like the schools, peer groups, literature and films play a role in early socialisation and adult socialisation. Girls and boys receive differential socialisation, which further perpetuate asymmetric roles and relationship. Boys are equipped with higher education and skills in order to perform the 'breadwinner's' role and the girls are initiated into domestic chores at an early age, given lesser education, trained to work hard and to develop low self-esteem. Boys receive a status of permanence as against girls who are seen as temporary members of the family. Very few families enable their daughters to develop an independent identity and dignity.

It has been observed that school books perpetuate images of mother as the 'housewife', father as the 'breadwinner'; boys playing with guns and trucks and girls playing with toys and dolls. Though several schools encourage involvement in sports for boys and girls, there are stereotyped patterns of playing. Boys play football, basketball and cricket and girls skip and involve in restricted games. Media messages about women and girls perpetuate stereotyped sexist images which enable the media industry to maintain its market. (Elaborated further in sub-section 19.4.4).

Activity 1

Write an essay based on your experience of (as a man or woman) socialisation at school and in the family. Compare your note, if those of other students at your Study Centre.

19.3.4 Class Structure and Women's Work

Class is defined primarily by the ownership of property or capital or economic resources. In simple terms, in a capitalist structure hierarchy is determined by wage, relation viz., people who work for a wage and people who hire workers for wages in rural areas, where the social, economic and political power coincide with caste structure. The constraints on women that vary from upper to the lower castes are reinforced by the class structure as well. Women of upper

castes/classes are secluded, and participate in activities in the domestic sphere. Women from *middle* castes with medium and small holdings are more likely to work on their own fields and in certain cases work for wages. Women from artisan castes/classes contribute to the home-based production. The women from the lower castes, also the property less ones, was labourers. They belong to the bottom of the hierarchy where seclusion and restriction on mobility are not practised.

In the urban context, where there is a transition to non-agricultural occupations (from an ‘ascribed’ to ‘achieved’ status situation) the upper castes form the predominant group among middle classes. Women of this class emerged from seclusion during the century to acquire education and employment. The important aspect is that the economic dependence on men is broken. However, this did not drastically change the subordination of women. The class structure appears to build upon the existing gender hierarchy in the caste structure. The family within the class structure also derives status from women’s education and employment. Women perform status – maintaining and enchancing activities to the family – as educated housewives, mothers and earners. Advertisements in matrimonial columns are ample evidence of this trend. The family concern in this context is with the kind, quality and purpose of women’s education, limiting the type and level of employment, and in retaining the requirement that women perform domestic roles as well as paid employment.

Women’s subordination is entrenched in the caste and class hierarchies which have to be understood. Otherwise, women’s issues will be misunderstood as mere cultural accidents and violence on women as stray incidents.

Check Your Progress 2

i) What are the constraints on women imposed by the caste structure? Answer in about seven lines.

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ii) What are the constraints on women imposed by the class structure? Answer in about seven lines.

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19.4 VIOLENCE ON WOMEN

There are different forms of violence on women which act as ideological threats to establishing a women's independent identity and dignity. The forms of violence that seek our attention here are:

- i) rape, sexual harassment and abuse,
- ii) domestic violence and dowry deaths,
- iii) prostitution, and
- iv) pornography.

19.4.1 Rape, Sexual Harassment and Abuse

Rape, sexual harassment, eve teasing, molestation and abuse of women/young girls by men act as function of limiting women's freedom and perpetuate the notion that women need male protection at various stages in life. Eve-teasing in colleges, public transport and other public places are rampant. There have been cases of gang rapes in colleges and incidents of acid throwing on young girls for defacing them in several parts of India. Sexual harassment and abuse at the workplace is least challenged or reported for fear of losing employment and stigmatisation.

It is futile to argue that provocative dresses worn by women are responsible for sexual harassment or molestation. In many cases saree and salwar kameez clad women have been sexually harassed. It is the scant regard for women which is responsible for sexual harassment of women besides their being regarded as commodities with no feeling, to be played with.

Rape is a violent sexual intercourse performed against the will and consent of the woman. It demonstrates a power relationship between men and women. Rape diminishes the identity of the woman as an individual and objectifies her. In India, atrocities and crimes on women are increasing so is the incidence of rape. Every two hours, a rape occurs somewhere in India. What is most frightening and disgusting about this upward swing is that a large percentage of these rape victims are children below the age of 12. Even toddlers of two and three years of age are not being spared but are considered suitable objects of sexual gratification by the rapist.

Paradoxically in our society, the victims of rape get stigmatised in the society. The woman who is the victim of rape is blamed because, the notion is that, "she must have invited it", "she perhaps was dressed provocatively" etc.

Except in a few cases most acts of rape are not outbursts of perversion. There are several forms of rape:

- a) rape within the family (e.g. incest rape, child sex abuse and rape by the husband, which is not legally accepted as rape);
- b) rape as caste/class domination (e.g. rape by upper caste men of lower caste women; rape of landless/agricultural labourers / bonded labourers by landlords etc.)
- c) rape of children, minors and unprotected young women;

- d) gang rapes during wars, communal riots and political upheavals;
- e) Custodial rapes (e.g. in police custody, remand homes, in hospitals, at the work place etc.);
- f) Stray, unpremeditated rapes.

The major rape incidents in Mathura and Maharashtra, and of Ramazabee in Hyderabad, in the police custody, and the court verdicts in these cases which acquitted the policemen on the clause of 'consent', led to a nation wide campaign for reform of the Rape Law. A change was brought by the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 1983. A man is said to have committed rape if he has sexual intercourse with a woman without her consent, or with her consent, but having obtained it in a state of insanity or intoxication or by putting her or any person in whom she is interested in fear of death or of hurt or when she is below sixteen years of age. The Act also introduced categories of custodial rape. In any case of custodial rape, if the victim gives an evidence that she did not consent to sexual intercourse, the court would assume that she did not consent. The onus of proving that rape was not committed will be on the man. However, the aspect of going into the details of past sexual history of the woman, in order to accept or reject the charge of rape has been left untouched. That is, the law sets standards of morality for protection of women.

19.4.2 Domestic Violence and Dowry Deaths

Violence on women in the family in the form of wife-beating, ill-treatment, emotional torture and the like, were considered family 'problems' and never acknowledged as crimes against women. It has been observed that domestic violence is prevalent in all classes of the society. An analysis of newspaper reports by a research study has observed a rising preponderance of deaths of women in the first few years of marriage. The extreme form of this violence on young brides came to be known as 'dowry deaths' or 'bride burning' cases.

In most of the bride burning or dowry death or dowry murder cases the insatiable demands of the in-laws of the daughter which cannot be met by her parents is the main reason. The daughter-in-law is tortured for bringing insufficient dowry. The in-laws conspire to finish the daughter-in-law so that they can get their son married for another time and extract more dowries from the next bride's parents.

In many cases dowry death or dowry murder or even post-marriage suicides (abetted by the torture of the bride at the hands of her-in-laws) could be averted if only the parents or relatives of the bride would have been willing to keep their daughter with them after their repeated refusal to go to their in-laws house. Arveen (Gogi) Kaur the only child of her parents wrote to her father much before committing suicide, "Papa don't throw me away like this. I swear on your life Papa I can't live here. I want to be back. I don't want anything more than this. I'm sure Papa you can afford me. Won't you Papa? Say something Papa. You don't know how your daughter is living out here. Please call her back. She'll die, Papa, but she won't live here.... " And she died of course.

In the case of suicides committed by the brides, it is proximately by the harassment and torture of the bride at the hands of her in-laws/husband and

remotely by the expenses involved in the upkeep of the daughter with or without her children by her parents and the patriarchal *izzat* (honour which it is felt by the bride's parents that the staying of their daughters in their natal family after marriage would tarnish their reputation and status in society) for which the bride's parents are not willing to accept their daughter back.

Keeping this in mind the social activists and feminists have been demanding the right of a daughter in parental property both ancestral and self-acquired. This, it is felt would mitigate the dowry death or dowry murder menace. As economic security for a bride is of the utmost importance like the emotional and moral support of her parents and relatives.

The existence, prevalence and ramifications of the practice of dowry is alarming. The incidence of dowry deaths which is in the increase in several cities, metropolitans and small towns was noticed by women's groups and there was a demand for an amendment in the Dowry Act during the early 1980s. Female foetuses are systematically aborted in North India and in Western India with the aid of Amniocentesis (a sex detection test) in order to avoid the future payment of dowry at the time of marriage.

It has been observed that the practice of dowry came into existence with hypergamy, i.e., a marriage between a lower caste woman and an upper caste man. The concept of 'stridhan', the share in property which women received at the time of marriage was slowly replaced by offering dowry by the bride's family to the groom's family. Instead of a share in landed (immovable) property, dowry is generally in the form of cash or kind on which young brides rarely have control. The growth of consumerism, i.e., the want to acquire consumer items like T. V., video, scooter, refrigerator etc., among the middle class has led further to the demand of dowry. This practice is now moving into the lower classes and non-Hindu communities where earlier it was non-existent. The prevalent notion about dowry is that it is compensation to the groom's family for taking over the responsibility of the woman's sustenance. This notion thrives on the assumption that a woman is a 'non-working' person and marriage entails the transfer of this 'burden' of maintaining a 'non-working' person from the bride's family to the groom's family. This notion is incorrect because (a) it undermines the multiple roles women play as housewives and mothers, and (b) does not explain why even employed women are expected to give dowry.

Some women's organisations provide counselling, legal aid and run support centres and short stay homes for women in distress. However, it is essential to reverse viewing women as 'expendable', 'dispensable' commodities and greater support for women should come forth from the community, neighbourhood and her parents.

There is a need to question the extraordinary value placed by parents and society on marriage and the pressure on women to-be-married-at-any-cost. The 'perpetuation of the practice of dowry undervalues women and make daughter unwelcome. The choice to remain 'single' (unmarried) should be respected and valued. Single women living alone or with the parental family should be nurtured as a 'norm' rather than a 'deviance'

19.4.3 Prostitution

Prostitution devalues women's dignity and stigmatises her as a 'fallen' woman in the society. The commodisation of woman's sexuality begins with the subordination of women. Women's identity as an individual is undermined by the objectification of her sexuality and the sale of sexual experience. In the urban context, where single male migration from rural areas is high the business of prostitution is rampant. In 1986, the earlier SITA Act was amended to prevent trafficking in prostitution. However, the new Immoral Traffic in Persons Prevention Act (ITPPA) has similar aims; objectives, logic and premises.

The ITPPA, however, continues to be biased against the prostitute. The clauses penalising the prostitute are retained. Simultaneously, the client is not made an offender.

Further, it makes little sense to raise penal measures without making provisions for strengthening the implementation structure. After all the reasons for the failure of SITA were:

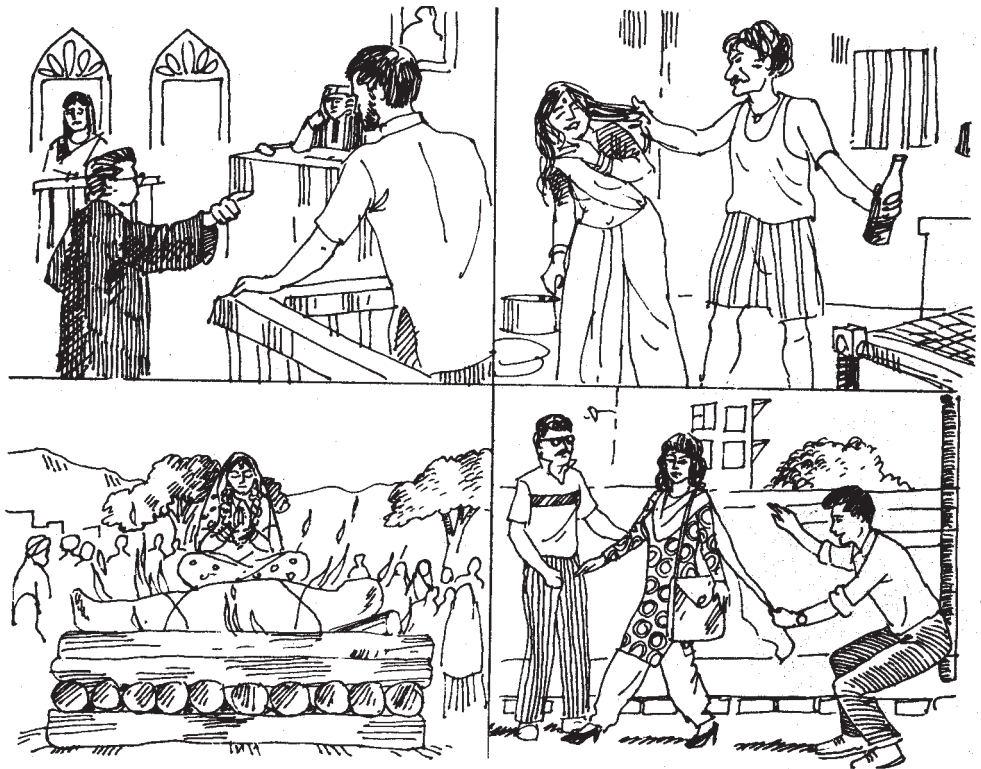
- a) brothel management - political nexus,
- b) circumvention of arrest by racketeers with penalisation of prostitutes,
- c) sanctions incorporated in the Act being utilised by police to extort bribes and fines from prostitutes,
- d) problems in producing evidence,
- e) sexist attitudes of magistrates,
- f) Paucity of reformatory homes, inadequate infrastructure facilities, poor quality of the staff and the corrective orientation towards rehabilitation. All these problems remain.

It is mainly situational compulsion, which gives rise to prostitutes and the problem of prostitution. Of the many situational compulsions, two stand out:

- i) social reprobates, and
- ii) economic paupers – who take to prostitution because of poverty and this is quite common.

In the former, we have those women who have been socially disowned, like widows, destitute and abandoned women, victims of deceit and cheating who were promised with marriage or were married and the person on whom they reposed faith sold them to a pimp or a brothel owner. Also amongst social reprobates we have women who have been discarded by their families, parents, husbands after becoming a victim of rape. Recently, in Bombay, a father refused to take back his daughter after she was raped. Not that he was poor, rather he was very rich. He did not want to take his daughter back because his honour and prestige would suffer. This happens in most of the rape cases. Ultimately, nowhere to go, they land up in brothels for no fault of theirs.

Prostitution is a serious and complex problem, which cannot be explained simplistically. Nobody joins it just for the fun of it. For there is no fun in it. Allowing every person to mutilate and violate your body, so many times a day



Violence against Women

round the year; year after year till one gets old is not a frivolous matter. It is humiliating and agonising. One is torn physically and mentally to such an extent that joining and knitting the threads and shreds of one's life anew is not only difficult but traumatically long and arduous.

Despite the Act several minor girls and women from rural areas and poor families are forced into the profession of prostitution, in which their living and working conditions are deplorable. They do not have control over their body, their earnings, their health deteriorates. Their children lack the support to receive education and other services. In the city of Bombay, certain non-governmental agencies, are running crèche facilities for the right care of these children and high schools for the working children. There are no governmental programmes to alleviate the problems of prostitutes.

The flesh trade, as it is known, is a thriving business where several groups of people like the pimps, procurers and police earn money at the expense of the women. The majority of these women/girls suffer from sexually transmitted diseases. Contraceptive precautions are not taken by them. It is found that many of them are victims of the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). However, the women in prostitution are targeted as bearers of the AIDS virus rather than victims of it.

19.4.4 Pornography and Misrepresentation of Women in the Media

The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986, prohibits indecent representation of women through advertisements or in publications, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner, and for matters connected or incidental thereto.

However, pornographic literature, magazines, pictures, hoarding and films are published/printed which are seen as upholding the ‘right to freedom of expression’, in actuality violate woman’s dignity. In turn these create and perpetuate patriarchal images of ‘strong’, ‘aggressive’, ‘violent’, and chauvinistic men on the one hand, and ‘meek’, ‘submissive’, ‘vulnerable’ women as sex objects on the other hand. These images are utilised in advertisements, like cosmetics, fabrics, domestic gadgets and various other commodities, for commercial gains. A woman is projected as sexy and enticing and the man as macho, violent and independent. The films too utilise a similar formula. There are pressure groups who protest from time to time against pornography and the misrepresentation of women in the media.

Check Your Progress 3

i) Tick the appropriate answer:

Rape occurs because:

- a) Women dress and move freely
- b) Men do not protect women
- c) It is an expression of sexual aggression
- d) Men are pervert.

ii) Is it enough to condemn dowry deaths? What are the values that you have to imbibe? Answer in seven lines.

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iii) What is most frightening and disgusting about the upward swing in rape? Answer in four lines.

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19.5 WOMEN’S ISSUES: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

In the last two decades there have been a good deal of awareness on women’s issues in India both at the governmental and non-governmental levels. Most significantly there has been the emergence of a self-conscious women’s

movement which has tremendously influenced the plans and policies of the government on women's issues in recent years. We discussed women's movements in details in Block 7 of ESO-12.

i) Women's Issues in the Pre-Independent Period

During the British period the struggle for women's right was considered as an integral part of the Independent movement by our nationalist leaders. It is important to mention here that in this period there emerged a good number of women's organisations as a result of the reform and nationalist movement. The Women's India Association (1917), the National Council of Indian Women (1926), All India Women's Conference (1927) etc. were spearheading the women's movement.

ii) Women's Issues in the Post-Independent Period

The constitution of our country followed the basic principle of women's equality as accepted in the Fundamental Rights Resolution of Karachi Congress. The provision of Article 15(3) empowered the state to make special provisions for women and children. The legal reforms in the 1950s sought to provide greater rights to Hindu women in marriage, inheritance and guardianship. The main thrust of development policies for women was provision of education, health and welfare.

iii) Contemporary Women's Issues

The women's issues came under sharp focus in the seventies. After the United Nation's General Assembly Declaration of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1967) and the subsequent UN request to its member states to submit report on the status of women in their countries. The Committee on the Status of Women in India was set up which submitted its report in 1974. In response to the UN call of Action (1975) and on the basis of the findings of the CSWI report, the Government of India has drawn up a Draft National Plan of Action for women. The Plan accords priority to the need of concrete action in the areas of education, health, welfare, and employment with special reference to the weaker section of the society. Besides the CSWI, Government of India also appointed various committees and commissions to suggest concrete action for the upliftment of the status of women in India. The most important of these have been that of the National Commission on the Self-employed Women 1988, National Perspective Plan for Women 1988-2000 AD, National Commission for Women 1991 etc. and very recently the 72nd and 73rd amendments to Indian constitution ensuring one third representation of women in the elected bodies. Based on the recommendations of these commissions and committees, and also in view of the popular demand of various welfare and women's organisation in recent years various concrete actions are initiated by the government in various areas.

iv) Basic Legislations

a) Marriage

The Government of India has banned polygamy for all the government servants. Monogamy has been accepted in the laws of other religions except Islam.

b) **Age at Marriage**

The special Marriage Act fixed the minimum age of marriage at 21 years for males and 18 years for females.

c) **Dowry**

Under the Dowry Prohibition Act now court is empowered to act on its own knowledge or on a complaint by any recognised welfare organisation on the dowry murder. The Indian Evidence Act also amended to shift the burden of proof to husband and his family where dowry is demanded and the bride dies within 7 years of the marriage otherwise than under normal circumstances. Anti Dowry Cells are also established some important urban centres to tackle this issue effectively.

d) **Sati**

The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act 1987 declared the practice of sati unlawful.

e) **Rape and Indecent Representation of Women**

The Criminal Law Act also amended to provide protection to the rape victims from the glare of publicity during investigation and trial. It also introduced change in the definition of rape to remove the element of consent. It also enhanced the punishment of this crime.

The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act banned the depiction in any manner the figure of a woman, her form or body or any part thereof in such a way as to have the effect of being indecent or regatory or desigrating women, or is likely to deprave, corrupt or injure the public morality or morals.” (NPPW: 1988)

f) **Sex-Determination Test**

In recent years there have been several agitations against the sex determination test. It is important to note that in Maharashtra and in several other states prenatal sex determination test has been declared illegal.

g) **Work**

According to the Equal Remuneration Act 1973, man and woman are to be paid equally for doing the same or similar work. The Act also forbids discrimination on the basis of sex at the time of recruitment and after.

Box 1

Maternity Benefits for Working Women

The Maternity Benefit Act provides for a maternity leave of 4½ months in the case of pregnancy, and 45 days for abortion for the working women in the factories, mines, plantations, government, and semi government establishments. It also makes provisions for creches to care for the children of working women

The Minimum Wage Act provides a mechanism for fixing up minimum rates of wages which should reflect the basic minimum needs of the workers.

v) **Employment Programme for Women**

For income generation for poor women various programmes are also initiated. The Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) has fixed a target of 30% women beneficiaries to be covered under this programme. The programme for Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) is meant to provide self-employment to rural women. The National Rural Employment Programme (NREP), Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme are meant to provide wage employment in rural areas. Under the programme called training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment rural youth are imparted new skill for generating self-employment. There are also special programmes for hilly and draught prone areas (see, for detail, Units 8,9,10 and 11 of Block 3 of this course). Women are given due considerations in these programmes. Besides, state governments have also introduced several programmes for employment among women through self-help groups etc.

Check Your Progress 4

Tick mark the correct answers.

- i) Which one of the following Article of the Constitution India empowered the government to make special provisions for women
 - a) Article 370
 - b) Article 356
 - c) Article 10
 - d) Article 15

- ii) The Maternity Benefit Act provides for maternity leaves in the case of pregnant women for
 - a) 46 days
 - b) 75 days
 - c) 90 days
 - d) 15 days

- iii) The Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) has 'fixed certain target for women beneficiaries to be covered under this Programme. This target is
 - a) 50%
 - b) 60%
 - c) 25%
 - d) 30%

19.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has presented a description of the status of women in India, through various indicators like the demographic, health, literacy, employment and political status. The caste structure and its role in curtailing women's freedom and the class structure and its perpetuation of women's subordination have been discussed. The family as an institution and its role in socialising a daughter to

perform a secondary role, the issue of dowry and different forms of violence that threaten the identity and dignity of women has been examined.

19.7 KEY WORDS

Hypergamy	: A marriage between a lower caste woman and an upper caste man.
Mortality Rate	: Measures the frequency of deaths.
Sex-ratio	: Indicates the proportion of females per 1000 males.
Shradha	: The death ceremony amongst the Hindus.

19.8 FURTHER READINGS

Chanana, Karuna, (eds.). 1988. *Socialisation, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*, Orient Longman Ltd.: New Delhi.

Desai, Neera and Maithreyi Krishnaraj, (eds.). 1987. *Women and Society in India*, Ajanta Publications: Delhi.

Government of India, 1974. *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India*, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare: New Delhi.

19.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Yes, there is a contradiction between the constitutional guarantee and the reality in the case of women. Though some women have made strides in certain fields the majority of women have to go a long way. The sex ratio has to be balanced, the life expectancy for women at all ages should be improved, women should gain access to health care, education, employment and have a greater say in political processes and affairs.
- ii) The low status of women of the country has implications to the process of development. Because of the prevailing situation 50 per cent of the population is being neglected. The economic pressures of poverty have a greater effect on women and girls in the household, who work harder, longer, eat lesser, gain lesser access to social goods and services.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The caste structure controls women's sexuality and the economic resources of the community through strict control on women's mobility seclusion, disinheritance of immovable property and rules of marriage. The caste structure maintains ritual purity, biological purity (through the birth of legitimate heirs), caste supremacy and economic power.
- ii) The class structure though not so strict, builds on the gender division created by the caste structure. The family draws status from women's achievements. Women enable to maintain and enhance the status of the

family. There are controls on type, equality and level of education imparted to a daughter. The respectability in the employment is evaluated and the dual role of the women are maintained intact causing extraordinary burden of family responsibilities on women. One of the major reasons why women (in the organised sector) occupy the positions of teachers, typists, nurses and doctors is because these professions are seen as an extension of their domestic roles.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) c.
- ii) It is important to respect women's right to property and inheritance. Extraordinary value should not be attached to marriage. If women choose to remain single, it must be seen as a valid alternative to marriage. Women are not expendable commodities. The birth of daughters should be welcomed. Their individuality, identity and dignity should be respected at all levels.
- iii) What is most frightening and disgusting about the upward swing in rape is that a large percentage of the rape victims are Children below the age of 12. Even toddler of two and three years of age are not being spared, but are considered suitable objects of sexual gratification by the rapist.

Check Your Progress 4

- i) d
- ii) c
- iii) d